

Editorials

Modalities and Sodalities

Allan Buckman

Though unfamiliar to most Christians, even those within the mission community, these church/mission structures have been around a long time. Credit for the rediscovery of these helpful and dynamic concepts goes to Dr. Ralph Winter, who first drew attention to these realities in an address given to the All-Asia Mission consultation in Seoul, Korea in August 1973. A full blown treatment later appeared in *Perspectives in the World Christian Movement*, under the title, “The Two Structures of God’s Redemptive Mission.”¹

Gifted with a brilliant mind, and with degrees in engineering (Caltech), theology (Princeton), education (Columbia) and linguistics/anthropology (Cornell), Winter became widely known for his many conceptual breakthroughs and unique approaches to mission challenges.

Examples include his work as co-founder of the TEE global mission initiative (13,000+ graduates), typing the entire unreached global population into just three categories (E-1, E-2, and E-3, each with its own unique linguistic and cultural challenge and each requiring its own unique evangelistic approach), as well as the founding of the Perspectives on the World Christian Movement initiative, with more than 80,000 alumni in the USA alone.²

Perhaps his most widely known contribution, however, is his *unreached peoples* concept first presented at the 1974 Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization. This shifting of emphasis from countries to people groups completely refocused the remaining task in global missions. Correspondingly, the resources of numerous mission agencies were shifted to accommodate this new concept.

All of this and more prompted *TIME Magazine* to include Dr. Ralph Winter in the cover story for its February 7, 2005, issue as one of “The 25 Most Influential Evangelicals in America.”

The modality concept can probably best be understood by equating it to the congregation that faithfully carries out its primary responsibilities of preaching, teaching, encouraging, and otherwise serving those who regularly gather to receive the Word and the Sacraments. The biblical antecedent may be found in the Jewish synagogue and the early Christian gatherings that followed from that structure.

Sodality references those believers who gather for the specific purpose of taking the Gospel to those who have not received it, and who are often hidden behind

barriers of language and culture. The biblical antecedent would be the missionary bands sent out by the early Christian congregations as, for example, the Apostle Paul and those with him sent by the church at Antioch (Acts 13:2ff.)

In the Roman Catholic Church, the diocese compares to the features of the modality and the orders to those of the sodality. Among Protestants, modalities compare to the congregations and sodalities to the mission societies. Lutheran examples of the latter would be the Lutheran Bible Translators, World Mission Prayer League, Christian Friends of New Americans (referenced below), and almost any of the 69 societies currently listed with the Association of Lutheran Mission Agencies (ALMA).

As Winter advises, a major implication of the modality/sodality concept is that both structures must be accepted by the Church as legitimate and necessary, as well as part of the people of God, i.e., the Church.³

At present, unfortunately, this understanding and vision is not sufficiently present in the Lutheran ecclesial and mission communities. Indeed, Ralph Winter commented on this noting that the Lutheran Reformation did, with its congregations, produce a diocesan structure comparable to that in the Roman Catholic tradition. In a comparable sense, however, the Lutheran Movement did not re-adopt the sodalities, i.e., the Catholic orders. He goes on to note, “this omission, in my evaluation, represents the greatest error of the Reformation and the greatest weakness of the resulting Protestant tradition.”⁴

To illustrate the dynamic quality of the relationship between modalities and sodalities (congregations and mission societies), the recently established Christian Friends of New Americans (501c3 in 2008, LCMS RSO-2010) is offered as an example. Working primarily out of a two-story 5,000 sq. ft. street front mission center in south St Louis city, it seeks to reach out primarily to the 600–800 refugees from numerous birth nations, who are being resettled in that part of the city each year.

One of its primary goals is to reach a minimum of 200 recently arrived refugees (New Americans) annually. It does this through “quick link” (contact within one month of arrival) ministries, such as the delivery of welcome packages, monthly Health and Wellness screenings, ESL classes, and more. The 200-300 New Americans with whom it links each year typically come from eight or more nations in Africa and Asia (Ethiopia, Eritrea, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Somalia, Nepal, Bhutan, and Burma).

During the past three years, two large home Bible studies have been established as a result of this effort with a combined weekly attendance of over 60, each of these closely associated with an LCMS congregation. From these have emerged two Nepali Lutheran Fellowships, one with an average Sunday attendance of 60, and the other between 15 and 20. Each is closely associated with one of two LCMS

congregations (Ascension and Messiah); and, in both instances, these prayer and praise gatherings are in the Nepali language.

It is interesting to note that this is happening in ethnically diverse urban St. Louis, where 22 of the 24 LCMS congregations have been in continuous decline for more than 30 years.

In this environment, CFNA operates entirely as a mission station, not as a congregation. Using its “draw-bridge-home” model, it seeks to link with New Americans through a half dozen service ministries. Through these it brings New Americans into the CFNA network and bridges them from no understanding of CFNA, or even the Holy Scriptures, to some level of awareness and, perhaps, even acceptance. This is accomplished by CFNA staff, as well as by numerous volunteer workers, primarily lay, but also with numerous clergy.

The last step is the “home” represented by an LCMS congregation. During the past three and a half years, there have been more than 110 baptisms and/or confirmations, all of them among New Americans from the nations referenced above. Most occurred in congregations (the balance at the Peace Center), and all of these New Americans now hold membership in one of four nearby LCMS congregations with which CFNA is closely affiliated.

On any given Sunday, upwards of 150 New Americans now attend LCMS congregations and/or the closely related ethnic Lutheran Fellowships. As recently as three years ago, most of these recently arrived New Americans would not have been present in these congregations and/or fellowships.

In densely packed multi-ethnic urban environments, a congregation acting on its own or even as a group of loosely aligned congregations, is at a severe disadvantage when attempting to cross barriers of language and culture. The very nature of these close-knit ethnic communities precludes the establishment of meaningful relationships through incidental, occasional contact with individual members of the ethnic community.

This is especially true if these contacts are primarily made with young people. Though often much more open, they cannot provide the all-important endorsements available only from the trusted, older and most respected community leaders. A challenge of this magnitude requires focus, patience, persistence, kindness, service, and more, all of it on a consistent ongoing basis.

Almost always beyond the capacity of pastors with their usual heavy work schedules, this is the perfect challenge for a well-focused, well-organized and well-connected mission society. Societies such as CFNA possess a demonstrated capacity to generate links within indifferent, or even resistant, ethnic communities and to intensify these links into relationships. Moreover, these links can be, and often are, generated within multiple ethnic communities simultaneously.

Having stepped into the network, many have also demonstrated a willingness to continue the progression and become part of a home Bible study, Ethnic Fellowship, or Lutheran congregation. These people, who have been pushed from country to country and have come to question not only their social status, but also their very identity, are finding a new identity in Christ, all within the context of a Lutheran congregation.

It should also be noted that most of those making this journey are doing so from within the context of Buddhist, Hindu, and sometimes even Muslim backgrounds. The truly interesting part is that, with few exceptions, they do so with the consent or tacit approval of the leadership of their various ethnic communities.

In a time of uncertainty regarding the future of Lutheran congregations in densely packed multi-ethnic urban settings, CFNA affords an example of mission/church solidarity already under way, and which is almost indefinitely reproducible.

In the past, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, and other Lutheran denominations as well, have become accustomed to reckoning their presence in any urban or geographic area in terms of Lutheran schools as well as the number of established congregations—as well they should. Perhaps now would be a good time to expand this view to take into account the presence of well-connected mission societies as well.

Endnotes

¹ Ralph D. Winter, “The Two Structures of God’s Redemptive Mission” in *Perspectives in the World Christian Movement*, 4th ed. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2009), 244–253.

² E-1 = same language, same culture.

E-2 = similar language (dialect), similar culture.

E-3 = different language, different culture.

³ Winter, “Two Structures,” 244.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 250.